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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a discussion of the gradual changes in society's sex role attitudes and the implications for children and early childhood education. The author states that the move toward equalizing the women's role in society was precipitated by the employment of women during World War II, and this movement is supported today by the following realizations: (1) the traditional structure is no longer functional to our economy; (2) traditional sex roles are dysfunctional in individual development; and (3) traditional sex-role typing is dysfunctional for marriage. Egalitarianism, now being focused on women, should be extended to men; the answer to sex role stereotyping lies not in role reversal but in role flexibility. Suggestions for early childhood educators include: (1) consciousness-raising sessions for preschool staff in which attitudes and feelings about sex role stereotypes are examined and worked through; (2) parent education programs dealing directly with sex roles to prepare parents to help their children recognize stereotyping role models; (3) curricular materials and books which do not reinforce traditional sex roles; (4) integrated play areas arranged so that all children are free to play in all areas; and (5) role models for children which are selective and nontraditional. (SDH)

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"A New Look at Children's Sexuality and Sex Role Identification"

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That the sex roles of males and females are going through some rather significant changes is no longer a debatable issue. Ten years ago it was. However, more recent research clearly supports the contention that there have been some definite changes in sex role attitudes, expectations, and behavior. For example, Jordan (1972) administered the Dunn Marriage Role Expectation Inventory to a group of men and women who had responded to the same instrument ten years earlier. These subjects were significantly less authoritarian and more equalitarian than they had been ten years earlier.

Similarly, I am currently involved in analyzing some data which compares the marriage role expectations of college students now with the expectations of a comparable group twelve years ago. This data indicates that today's students are significantly less traditional than were students twelve years ago.

In 1950, 26 percent of America's wives were employed outside the home. Today more than half the wives in America are gainfully employed. The percentage of mothers in the labor force with children ages five and under increased from 12 percent in 1950 to 32 percent in 1970 (See Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 1971, pp. 212-213.) I heard a representative of a major industry which has been very male-oriented and male-dominated say recently that last year 43 percent of their applicants were women and this year 82 percent of their applications are from women. Other representatives of industry

report that when they go on campuses to recruit today they frequently see more women than men. (From a panel discussion presented at the Southeastern Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, March 17-19, 1974).

Based on the above information, my own impressions, and generalized data so apparent in our current social milieu, there seems to be little support for the argument that the change in sex roles is a figment of feminists' wishful thinking.

To be sure, the transition has been very gradual and evolutionary rather than revolutionary, and traditional sex roles are still very much in evidence in our society. There are several reasons why they have persisted so long and changed so slowly.

For one thing, traditional sex roles, until recently, were quite functional for our economic system and were supported by our cultural value system.

The patriarchal marriage system of the Judeo-Christian tradition was quite functional in the agrarian economy which existed up to the time of the Industrial Revolution. In an agrarian economy the requirement for the superior physical strength of the male makes the traditional instrumental-expressive role structure very functional.

Then, with developing technology the strength advantage of the male was negated by the machine. Thus, the traditional sex role structure was no longer necessary - but it continued to persist, in part, because males were in control and staying in control was essential to the support of the male's ego needs. But it continued to persist also because it was

sanctioned by our cultural value system. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the economic system is so tied into the religious value system that the traditional sex role structure has been seen as being divinely decreed. The institution in which women are most suppressed today, as far as leadership is concerned, is the church. There are many men and women in our culture who use Biblical support for their views on male dominance and female submission without any regard for the sociocultural and historical situation in which the Bible was written.

Another reason change has come so slowly is that roles are learned primarily through socialization within the family, and the socialization process tends to recycle itself. No matter how much we protest to the contrary, we still tend to rear our children the way we were reared. Only through learning new styles and by conscious effort do we relate to our children in ways that are significantly different from the ways in which we were related to as children. Hence, changes in the socialization process come very slowly. And even though we intellectualize approval of non-traditional role patterns, accepting and acting on them at the gut level comes much more slowly.

How, then have we come to the present level of change from the traditional sex role structure to a more egalitarian role structure? With these potent forces of the economic system, the religious value system and the socialization process reinforcing the traditional patterns, how has the change come about?

I have indicated that the Industrial Revolution set the stage for change by negating the strength advantage of men, but that alone was not sufficient. Actually, the change was precipi-

tated by the second world war. The draft took so many men out of the labor market that a dramatic increase in the number of women employed in industry and the government was necessitated. Then with the return of the war veterans there was an attempt to put women back in "their place" - the home. There was a glorification of the wife-mother role in much of the literature of the late 40's and 50's. But having tasted the freedom and the participation in the job market, women were not to be denied. To paraphrase a song of a past era, "How you gonna keep 'em down in the home once they've seen the inside of GM?"

Closely associated with the effects of the war period was Kinsey's sex research which made women more aware of their sexuality and did much to liberate them in this area.

The changes which were set in motion by these events of the 1940's have more recently been reinforced by the realization that:

1. The traditional structure is no longer functional to our economy, as we once thought. By keeping women out of the "production" end of our economy we have failed to develop and make use of tremendous talent resources and potential problem-solving skills.

2. Traditional sex roles are dysfunctional in individual development. They discourage the creative development and involvement of the woman outside of the home and they inhibit expressiveness in men while forcing men to compete, to achieve, to prove themselves...the perfect formula for hypertension, ulcers, coronaries and strokes.

As Clark Vincent has pointed out, while girls in our

society may not be valued as highly as boys, at least little girls are appreciated for what they are while little boys are appreciated for what they will become.

At ages 5, 6, 7, a little girl can come into the presence of friends or relatives and listen to the response: "My, what a pretty face; don't you look lovely!" She exists; therefore, she is appreciated.

Watch a boy, same age, same situation. He's already learned that just being is not enough. "You know what I wanta be when I grow up? Wanta see how fast I can run? Wanta see my muscle? See what I built?" Prove! Prove! Prove!

Little boys 5, 6, 7 gather around to see who can pee the furthest. Later it's to see who can masturbate the quickest and ejaculate the furthest. Prove! Prove! Prove!

Even the best efforts of the Feminist Movement have not changed this, because we are not starting early enough to change it.

Where does it start? Probably in the hospital nursery at day one. If you don't believe it, watch parents, grandparents and other adults as they gather at the window and look at the babies. Watch and listen to the differences in their responses if the baby is a boy - or if the baby is a girl. Already they are holding up mirrors for the child. Watch how differently people play with a girl infant and a boy infant. We're putting them on sex-role tracts that in different ways are dysfunctional for the development of both males and females. (Some of the above ideas adapted from an address by Clarke Vincent, "The Impact of Business-Industry on Marital and Family Health,"

Southeastern Council on Family Relations Annual Conference,
Tuscaloosa, Alabama, March 17-19, 1974).

3. Traditional sex-role typing is dysfunctional for marriage.

It depersonalizes marital interaction. Two persons marry and they are changed into statuses and roles, and they tend to relate on the basis of their roles and role-expectations. They are no longer John and Marsha -- they are husband and wife.

Given the fact that changes are needed and they are occurring, I would next like to share with you some concerns I have about how we are changing sex roles:

1. Sometimes I have the feeling and the fear that what we are really doing in our attempts to change the traditional sex-role stereotypes is masculinizing the female role. This seems somewhat to be at least the unintended thrust of the feminist movement: pushing women to compete with men. I fear we are going to have little girls prove themselves by what they can do and want to become; bigger girls competing to see who can masturbate the fastest; women competing to see who can become the top executive and get the biggest ulcer the fastest. If this is the outcome of our present efforts then we will be worse off than before.

2. Related to this, it concerns me that what we have is women's liberation when what we need is human liberation. The focus is beginning to include males, but that is not where the emphasis has been. If we continue to socialize boys so that we saddle them with anxieties about their ability to implement the male role while at the same time socializing girls to

compete with them for that role, then we are undoubtedly headed for what Ruth Hartley referred to as "an era of more confident women and more anxious men" ("Implications of Changes in Sex-Role Patterns," in John N. Edwards, (ed.) The Family and Change, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1969, p. 221).

The egalitarianism which is now being focused on females must be extended to males as well -- it has not been yet.

For example, our Laura can play with dolls or she can play football and baseball with the neighborhood boys and receive peer approval. Our boys can only play football and baseball. They cannot play dolls - (unless they are of the new "boy doll" variety).

Betty, to whom I am married, is currently an architectural student. When she gets her degree she may become an architect or a housewife and she will be respected and admired by her peers. If I chose to become a househusband I would be treated as a deviant and would earn something less than respect and admiration from my peers.

I do not mean to imply that the answer is in role reversal. Rather it seems to be in role flexibility. Somehow we must change the motivation of individuals, starting with very small children, so that what they do and what they give and what they become is not to prove or demonstrate -- but is a function of their being. And we must come to appreciate each individual without regard for sex, for the fact that he or she is the only one of them that will ever be.

What implications are here for Early Childhood programs?

1. Every preschool staff should have consciousness-raising sessions in which attitudes and gut-level feelings about sex role stereotypes are examined and worked through. I have already indicated that it is not enough for parents to intellectualize more flexible sex roles; they must also internalize them at the feeling level because this is the level that really affects our behavior. The same thing is true of preschool teachers.

2. Parent education programs should deal directly with sex-roles, helping parents to see the seeds of conflict they may be planting if they socialize children for traditional roles in a society that is becoming increasingly egalitarian.

3. Parent education should include sessions to prepare parents to help children to critique and discuss the stereotyped role models they observe on television and in the other media.

4. Check the books and curricular materials you use to see if they reinforce traditional sex roles. There are still many such materials. I know of some kindergartens which have the children to match feminine activities with girls and masculine activities with boys.

Consider some of the newer curricular materials, such as "Free to be You and Me," a recording by Marlowe Thomas and Friends, available from Ms. Magazine. You may want to get a copy of "A Basic Library for Liberated Children," an annotated bibliography by Letty Cotten Pogrebin, published by Women's

Action Alliance, Inc., 370 Lexington Avenue, Room 601, New York 10017.

5. Be creative in encouraging the integration of play areas so that children feel free to play in all areas without regard to sex.

6. Be selective and non-traditional in choosing the role models to which you expose the children.

This year, in our kindergarten at the University of Kentucky, in connection with some sex role research Dr. Thornburg, program Director, and I were doing, we used the "Community helpers" emphasis to expose the children to a variety of non-traditional role models: Policewoman, woman truck driver, firewoman, male nurse, male telephone operator, male hairdresser, and male secretary. For "Dad's Night," rather than having them work with wood, the fathers helped the children bake cookies.

Children get their role perceptions and expectations largely from the models to whom they are exposed.

CONCLUSION:

Changes in sex roles are occurring. That is an obvious and seemingly inevitable fact. The implication of that fact is that Early Childhood Educators have a serious responsibility to work with parents and children to help them relate creatively to the changes so that rather than the changed situation becoming a source of frustration it might become a catalyst to maximizing their individual happiness and development.